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# A Welcome Windows Phone

**By DAVID POGUE**

Did you hear the news? A new model of a certain black, rectangular, touch-screen smartphone has just arrived. Its new software contains what the company says are hundreds of new features. The most eye-popping enhancement is speech recognition: you can tell this new phone to call someone, text someone or give you driving directions.

I refer, of course, to [Microsoft's](#) Windows Phone 7.5. Gotcha!

Yes, Microsoft is belatedly trying to take on the [iPhone](#) and [Android](#) phones with its own phone software. It's available on several phones from Samsung and HTC, at prices from \$50 to \$200 with two-year contracts; each major American carrier offers at least one. (The Windows Phone 7.5 software, code-named Mango, is also available as a free upgrade for older Windows Phone 7 phones.)

Windows Phone 7.5 is gorgeous, classy, satisfying, fast and coherent. The design is intelligent, clean and uncluttered. Never in a million years would you guess that it came from the same company that cooked up the bloated spaghetti that is Windows and Office.

Most impressively, Windows Phone is not a feeble-minded copycat. Microsoft came up with completely fresh metaphors that generally steer clear of the iPhone/Android design (grid-spaced icons that scroll across home pages).

The home screen presents two columns of colorful tiles. Each represents something you've put there for easy access: an app, a speed-dial entry, a Web page, a music playlist or an e-mail folder.

More than ever, the text on them conveys instant information, saving you the effort of opening them up. A number on a tile tells you how many voice-mail messages, e-mail messages or app updates are waiting. The music tile shows album art, the calendar tile identifies your next appointment. A tile for your sister might display her latest [Twitter](#) and Facebook updates.

Windows Phone first appeared, incomplete, a year ago. There was no copy and paste. No way to add new ringtones. No multitasking. No visual voice mail. No tethering option (which lets you use the phone as an Internet antenna for your laptop). No unified e-mail in-box for multiple accounts. No message threading. No Twitter integration. You couldn't see multiple categories at once on the calendar.

In Mango, Microsoft has addressed all of these shortcomings.

Most of them bear that new Microsoft finesse and excellence, but there are some footnotes. For example, you get tethering and visual voice mail only if your cellphone company offers it; so far, only T-Mobile offers the latter.

Another example: You enter the multitasking switcher by holding down the phone's Back button. But this "multitasking" is the iPhone variety: when you switch out of an app, it doesn't keep running in the background, draining the battery. (There are the usual exceptions: for example, music keeps playing, and GPS navigation keeps running.)

Instead, the app you're leaving goes into suspended animation. It's supposed to spring back instantly when you return. Unfortunately, Windows Phone apps must be rewritten for this multitasking feature; until then, they can take several seconds to wake up again.

Meanwhile, there's still no way to create folders to organize your apps. There's no way to send videos to other phones as MMS messages. There is still no built-in video chat app. And, as on the iPhone, you can't watch Flash videos on the Web.

But the drawbacks column is still much shorter than the goodies column.

The Bing searching app now offers audio and visual searching. That is, you can hold the phone up to any pop song playing wherever you go; in about three seconds, it identifies the song and offers the chance to buy it online. It's just like Shazam on iPhone or Android, but built in.

Visual search is a lot like the Google Goggles app for iPhone or Android: you can aim the phone's camera at a bar code, a book cover or a DVD cover, and the phone identifies it by product name and company.

You can even aim the camera at any printed text, and marvel as the Bing app translates it into typed text, ready for pasting into an e-mail message or Word document. There's even a Translate button if you want the scanned text flipped roughly into another language. This is

amazing, amazing stuff — why aren't people cheering in the streets?

Then there's the speech feature. When you hold down the Windows-logo button, you get a talking virtual assistant, like Siri on the iPhone 4S.

Well, O.K., it is not just like Siri. The recognition is nowhere near as good or as broad. You can't actually dictate what you would otherwise type, as on Android and the iPhone; the only things you can dictate are text messages, search terms and e-mail messages. And Microsoft makes no effort to give the phone a personality, as Apple did.

But it's great at understanding its Big Four commands: Call, Text, Find (on the Web) and Open (an app). "Call mom," "Text Casey Robin," "Find coffee shops" and "Open Angry Birds," for example, are all reliable and important. (On the iPhone, you can't open apps by voice at all.)

In Windows Phone 7.5, you can now put members of your social circle into groups, which makes communicating with them, following them or seeing their photos very easy.

In your address book, each person's card displays a complete history of your conversations, no matter how they took place: via text message, Facebook chat, e-mail or whatever. If you begin a Facebook chat with somebody who has to dash out, you can keep right on chatting via text message; the phone seamlessly switches between those chat channels.

Twitter and LinkedIn are built in, too, although there's no way to send or receive private messages on Twitter (known as direct messages).

Mango still offers everything that Windows Phone already had going for it: a terrific onscreen keyboard with smart auto-suggestions. Integration with your Xbox account. Microsoft's Zune music service (\$15 a month for all the music you want to hear). A GPS app that now speaks your directions, turn by turn.

Now, if this phone had arrived before the iPhone, people would have been sacrificing small animals to it.

But Microsoft's three-year lag behind its rivals is going to be very tough to overcome.

Windows Phone is considered a weird outlier. Unlike with the iPhone, there's no teeming universe of alarm clocks, chargers, accessories and cars that fit these phones.

Similarly, Windows Phone's app store has 30,000 apps, which is an achievement — but

Android offers 10 times as many, and the iPhone store has 16 times as many.

Microsoft says that it's quality, not quantity, and that all the important apps are there. Unfortunately, a long list of essentials are still unavailable: Pandora radio, Dragon dictation, Line2, Flight Track Pro, Ocarina, Instagram, Hipstamatic. You should note, too, that Microsoft's schoolyard grudge against Google manifests itself in several disappointing ways: you can't export your videos to YouTube, and you can't search with Google.

In other words, Microsoft may face quite a Catch-22, no matter how superb its work: Windows Phone isn't popular because it isn't popular.

Microsoft has seen this movie before. Remember the Zune, which Microsoft took off life-support this month? In the end, it was a beautiful, capable, highly refined music player — but nobody bought it. Why would anyone buy the kooky off-brand player, when the iPod offered safety in numbers?

Let's hope the Windows Phone story doesn't play out the same way. Microsoft's work here deserves attention, praise and sales. Maybe it's not quite as mature as the iPhone or Android. But the world is a more interesting place with Windows Phone in it.

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